

# GRAMMATICAL ISSUES IN PREPARING BILINGUAL EXAMINATION QUESTIONS AT A TERTIARY ODL INSTITUTION

**Hazidi Abdul Hamid**

Open University Malaysia  
hazidi@oum.edu.my

**Cik Norazlina Mohamad**

Open University Malaysia  
norazlina\_mohamad@oum.edu.my

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines grammatical problems in bilingual examination papers at an Open Distance Learning tertiary institution. Bilingual examination papers evoke multiple problems particularly when aiming for equal meaning in both languages and no grammatical errors. Errors may persist even with extensive care and diligence. Errors may be problematic for both learners and the academicians grading the papers. English - Malay translation is a popular area of study in Malaysia with numerous papers but, to date, we found no literature examining grammatical problems in translating examination questions from English into Malay, nor Malay into English, particularly in the context of ODL institutions that provide bilingual examination questions. This absence evokes questions on the nature of the grammatical (and syntactical) problems. This paper examines bilingual examination questions selected from multiple disciplines to ascertain the types of errors that appear in them. These findings are compared to errors from other genres. Analysis shows two areas of grammatical errors: in verbal elements (VP) and prepositional phrases. This may be because these constituents require knowledge of the semanticity more than structure and form. Knowledge the specific kind of errors here may help the institution to provide training for people involved focusing on the specific area where it is needed.

**Keywords:** *Grammar, Syntax, Error, Examination, Questions, TGG*

## INTRODUCTION

This exploratory study was conducted in an Open Distance Learning tertiary education institution which uses bilingual examination papers. The courses at this institution are predominantly offered in English except language specific courses: for example, Mandarin and Tamil. The use of English was adopted due to demand for it from employers, particularly in the private sector. Moreover, in spite of the Malaysian education system being run in Malay, some sections of the Malaysian public are unable to use the language at higher levels, particularly not in tertiary education.

The focus of this study is the examination questions that are set in two languages: Malay and English. The aim here is to show that using bilingual examination papers requires much more than a simple case of translating questions from one language to another language.

These papers are prepared by subject matter experts who are as follows;

1. They all have postgraduate qualifications in their respective fields. They are employed to prepare examination papers in their respective fields.
2. They are all experienced educators in their respective areas. The question setters are also tutors in their respective fields.
3. Some of them have experienced living and studying overseas in countries where English is spoken as the native tongue.

The process of examination paper preparation.

1. The question setters are assigned by the faculty. They are generally chosen from the faculties' database of subject matter experts. The subject matter experts would be chosen from the academic community or relevant industry. They are chosen based on their qualification and experience.
2. The draft papers are submitted to the faculties where they are given to moderators. The moderators are lecturers in the respective subject who are either employed by the university or members of other institutions, or work in relevant related industry.
3. The moderated papers are either returned to the question setters for corrections or edited to suit the standard examination format of the university by the faculty members – when there are no errors.

This process ensures that the finish products are often error free. Although, rarely, errors do occur for various reasons. This process also means that the content of the questions, in both languages, are meant to be in the questions. This paper focuses on bilingual examination questions, thus this also applies to these papers in both languages because the papers are moderated by peers in the respective field or fields related to the specific area of the examination paper.

There is, however, a persistent problem. From personal experience both setting these examination papers and moderating them, we found that disagreements evolving around the choice of terminology used and misunderstanding among students often occur. The latter, emerging from the common requests for clarification from students concerning these questions involving, usually the following areas:

- (a) The questions in the different languages do not make the same demands
- (b) The terms used in one language does not suit the terms used in the other.

Hence, we arrive at the need to write this paper.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **The Objective of This Paper**

The aim here is to show the subtler problem that arise from using two languages (in this case, Malay and English) in examination papers. The objective of this paper is to show that using bilingual examination papers requires much more than a simple case of translating questions from one language to another language. This is not focussed on grammatical errors in the translation because these are rare in this corpus: the papers are set by competent practitioners and educators in the relative fields. Moreover, the questions papers go through a moderation process before being cleared for use.

The ‘subtler’ problems include mainly cultural and semantic issues. For example, this paper points to words in different languages can be regarded cross-linguistic synonyms but are actually polysemous with significantly different meaning particularly in the context they are being used.

We propose that while it is relatively simple to present questions simultaneously in two languages, the process requires a greater sensitivity to cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences both in linguistic and cultural terms.

### **The Problem Posed by the Material**

From the beginning, we learnt that the corpus tools we have available (Wordsmith and Ant Conc) are not able to perform the primary analysis because even when the questions express the same meaning, the difference in syntax structure ensures that:

- (a) The position of Word1 in language A does not always correlate with the position of Word1’s synonym in language B.
- (b) The relationship between the constituents of the sentences in the correlating languages are not the same. This means that the sequence of constituents in the correlating sentences are not the same. Consequently, Word1L1 cannot be automatically compared with Word1L2 because they are in different position in their sentences.

### **The Solution**

The solution for analysis is to manually compare of the question pairs means that the sample taken from the corpus must be small. Thus, the question pairs are taken from randomly chosen questions papers. The question pairs that exhibit instances of irregularities on the kind mentioned above are selected and used herein.

Note again that we are not looking for grammatical errors because errors are easy to find, and they are handled in the initial preparation stage of the examination papers.

We are looking at the specific instances areas that are “hard to get right” and require deeper knowledge of both languages in terms of differences in culture, semantics, and pragmatics. The point is that preparing multilingual examination papers requires extensive knowledge of language and culture: it is essentially an area of both cross-cultural communication and a site of intercultural communication. Thus, it requires the necessary care and focus.

The primary step is to categorize the question pairs into groups that exhibit similar patterns of irregularities. Secondly, we will try to offer an account for the irregularities. Finally, suggestions for further research and effort in preparing bilingual examination questions will be made.

### **QUESTION PAIRS WITH NO PROBLEMS**

Question pairs placed into this category are non-problematic bilingual questions. These question serves as a control group in which the question have the following characteristics:

- I. The question pairs express equal modality in both languages
- II. The grammar of the question pairs does not express different demands
- III. There is no culturally based difference between the questions in the pairs.

### The Question Pairs

- (a) **Why must discipline be given priority in early childhood education?** / *Mengapa disiplin perlu diberikan keutamaan dalam pendidikan awal kanak-kanak?*
- (b) **Observational method** is often employed as a methodology in psychology research. What do you understand by the term ‘observational method’? Discuss the **THREE** strengths and **THREE** weaknesses of this method. / *Kaedah pemerhatian sering digunakan sebagai metodologi dalam kajian psikologi. Apa yang anda faham dengan istilah ‘Kaedah Pemerhatian’? Bincangkan TIGA kekuatan dan TIGA kelemahan kaedah ini.*
- (c) Discuss how Malaysian education system can provide a legitimate mechanism for the students to achieve and “move up” in social class with appropriate examples / *Bincangkan bagaimana sistem pendidikan Malaysia boleh membekalkan mekanisme yang sah untuk pelajar mencapai dan “bergerak ke atas” dalam kelas social dengan contoh yang bersesuaian.*
- (d) What **FOUR (4)** aspects would you suggest to teachers who want meaningful knowledge construction among students? / *Apakah EMPAT (4) aspek yang akan anda cadangkan kepada guru yang ingin membantu pelajar membina pengetahuan yang bermakna?*

### PROBLEM ONE: DIFFERENT MODALITIES

Two words may be regarded as cross-linguistic synonyms, but words often require more than syntactical structure to be meaningful. Culture often play a big role in this difference. A term or an expression may be neutral in their respective languages but be inappropriate in the other language. The bilingual questions in this category are grammatical in both languages and the translations. The sentence structure expresses different modalities in the question pairs.

### The Question Pairs

- (a) What are the **FOUR Positive Qualities** that make an effective teacher. / *Nyatakan EMPAT Kualiti Positif yang **boleh membentuk** guru yang berkesan.*
  - (1) ‘that make’ and ‘*boleh membentuk*’ actually carry different modalities: “*Boleh membentuk*” actually means “can make”. Syntactically the pair are appropriate with the exception of the underlined terms. Syntactically both sentences are appropriate. Both questions are also acceptable in the respective tongues. However, “that make” carries the factual statement of the simple tense which means that the action stretches from an indefinite past to the indefinite future, whereas “*boleh membentuk*” expresses likelihood or possibility using a modal. The latter’s appropriate literal translation would be ‘can make’ which would not be as appropriate in English.
- (b) The advancement of future technology has brought about many changes in the ways we teach and the ways we learn. Identify and discuss any one type of future technology that may have an impact on education. Your discussion should focus on the following aspects: How do we apply the technology in teaching and learning? How will the technology change teaching and learning? What are the changing roles of the students and the teachers? / *Kemajuan teknologi masa depan telah membawa banyak perubahan kepada cara kita mengajar dan juga cara kita belajar. Kenalpasti dan bincangkan mana-mana satu jenis teknologi masa depan yang mempunyai impak kepada pendidikan. Perbincangan anda harus menumpu kepada aspek-aspek berikut: Bagaimanakah kita mengaplikasikan teknologi tersebut dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran? Bagaimanakah teknologi tersebut **mengubah** pengajaran dan pembelajaran? Apakah **perubahan** peranan pelajar dan juga guru?*

- (i) Here again we have the same issue as in (a). “will... change” [future modal] versus “mengubah” [present simple] and “are the changing roles” [present continuous] versus “perubahan” [infinitive]
- (c) **Describe ONE activity that will be carried out in each of the technologies integration steps** / **Huraikan SATU aktiviti yang dilaksanakan dalam setiap langkah pengintegrasian teknologi.**
- (d) **Piaget’s theory of cognitive development describes how individuals think. Describe FIVE assumptions put forward by Piaget and the implication of each for classroom practice** / **Teori Piaget menerangkan mengenai perkembangan kognitif bagaimana individu berfikir. Huraikan LIMA andaian yang dikemukakan oleh Piaget dan implikasi untuk setiap amalan dalam bilik darjah.**
  - (i) The difference here expresses the same issue as in (a) but focused on the meaning carried by singular words rather than phrases: “huraikan” actually means to elaborate which is beyond ‘describe’

The same issue is reflected in samples e, f, and g below.

- (e) **Suggest how you would use Vygotsky’s theory of assisted learning and scaffolding in your own classroom** / ***Cadangkan bagaimana anda dapat menggunakan teori pembelajaran berbantu dan perancahan Vygotsky dalam kelas***
- (f) **Suggest how you would use Vygotsky’s theory of assisted learning and scaffolding in your own classroom** / ***Cadangkan bagaimana anda dapat menggunakan teori pembelajaran berbantu dan perancahan Vygotsky dalam kelas***
- (g) **Suggest how you would use Vygotsky’s theory of assisted learning and scaffolding in your own classroom** / ***Cadangkan bagaimana anda dapat menggunakan teori pembelajaran berbantu dan perancahan Vygotsky dalam kelas***
  - (i) In (d), (e) and (f), “You would use” is not “dapat menggunakan”
- (h) **Explain the meaning of Equality of Educational Opportunity according to the views of either the functionalist or conflict theorists. Discuss how Malaysian education system provides equal opportunity to all students in schools. Justify your answers with appropriate examples** / ***Jelaskan maksud “Kesamaan dalam Peluang Pendidikan” mengikut pandangan ahli teori fungsionalis atau konflik. Bincangkan bagaimana sistem pendidikan Malaysia dapat membekalkan kesamaan peluang kepada semua pelajar dalam sekolah. Justifikasi jawapan anda dengan contoh yang bersesuaian.***
  - (i) This pair shows a different realization of the same issue. In Malay, “dapat membekalkan kesamaan peluang”, the question assumes that the education system has the ability to provide equal opportunity whereas in English, “provides equal” does not make allusions to possibility, it makes a statement that the system provides said opportunity from an indefinite past to the indefinite future.

## PROBLEM TWO: NOT THE SAME ACTION BUT THE SAME NOTION

Using two languages simultaneously involves relating the same meaning in both languages. In some cases, the words in L1 and L2 are not directly synonymous but when in the sentences, they convey the “same” notion in making the demand of the question.

### The Question Pairs

- (a) **Explain FIVE aspects of deficiency found in children with special needs.** / *Terangkan LIMA aspek kekurangan yang boleh diperhatikan pada Kanak-Kanak Berkeperluan Khas.*
- (i) ‘found’ is not the same as *boleh diperhatikan*. “Found” implies looking for something where *boleh diperhatikan* can be literally translated as “can be observed”. However, the demands made in both questions are the same and appropriate to the conventions of the language.
- (b) **How do you identify a child who is facing emotional problems?** / *Bagaimana anda mengenalpasti kanak-kanak yang mempunyai masalah emosi?*
- (i) “facing” and “*mempunyai*” are not synonymous. Here again the question verbs carry different meanings, but the questions do carry the same notion as appropriately expressed in the respective language and culture.
- (c) **Recommend SIX ways to help children cope with the stressful events.** / *Syorkan ENAM cara untuk membantu kanak-kanak menghadapi situasi yang tertekan.*
- (i) “to help children cope with” – “*untuk membantu kanak-kanak menghadapi*”. Here again constituents in question do not express the same meaning but do express the same notion as is appropriate by the convention of the language and culture respectively.
- (d) **Discuss Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the concept of scaffolding by Vygotsky. Give TWO appropriate examples in teaching young children which are related to these two principles.** / *Bincangkan konsep Zon Perkembangan Proximal dan scaffolding menurut Vygotsky. Kaitkan KEDUA-DUA konsep ini dalam pengajaran awal kanak-kanak dengan memberi DUA contoh yang bersesuaian.*
- (i) “which are related” and “*kaitkan*”. The difference here is in the verbal phrase: in Malay, the two principles are already related, and the student is ask to show example of this relationship, where as in Malay the question asked the student to make the relationship happen and then produce the examples.
- (e) **Preventive supervision is one of the commonly used types of supervision by school administrators in enhancing the quality of education. State briefly its main function.** / *Pencerapan pencegahan sering digunapakai oleh pentadbir sekolah dalam mempertingkatkan kualiti pendidikan. Nyatakan dengan ringkas fungsi utama pencerapanini.*
- (i) “one of the commonly used” implies more than one option whereas “*sering digunakan*” simply means that X is commonly used.



- (f) **Discuss the extent to which the organisational structure of schools is bureaucratic in nature** / *Bincangkan sejauh manakah struktur organisasi sekolah itu birokratik keadaannya.*
- (i) “in nature” is not “*keadaannya*” [condition] but “*sifatnya*”. The difference lies in the term ‘nature’ and ‘*keadaannya*’. Nature implies an inherent state whereas *keadaannya* refers to a present status without the implication that it is inherent.

### PROBLEM THREE: INACCURATE VERB

#### The Question Pairs

- (a) **List out FOUR types of basic reflexes in young infants.** / *Senaraikan EMPAT jenis refleksi asas bayi.*
- (i) *Refleksi* is reflection not reflexes even though the root word is the same.
- (b) **Discuss the conditions at school level that must be met for school-based management to occur in schools** / *Perihalkan syarat-syarat di peringkat sekolah yang perlu dipenuhi untuk membolehkan pengurusan berasaskan sekolah dilaksanakan di sekolah.*
- (i) Discuss in Malay is commonly translated as *bincangkan*. *Perihal* / *perihalkan* is a literary term which means, ‘tell the story of’. Although, this strictly not an error but the terms come from different genres and carry with them very different semantic loads.

### ERRONEOUS

#### The Question Pairs

- (a) **Compare published curricula, with curriculum developed by teachers** / *Bandingkan kurikulum yang telah disediakan dengan yang dibina oleh guru.*
- (i) This pair can be regarded as simply erroneous because “published” and “*telah disediakan*” do not convey the same processes. Both phrases carry the notion that the item had been prepared by someone else beforehand, however, “publish” implies a deliberate, perhaps commercial, process where as “*telah disediakan*” encompasses the whole range of the preparation process, from a person at the kitchen table to a multinational publication effort.

### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This paper is meant to show that preparing bilingual examination papers require far more than syntactical accuracy, it involves knowledge of cultural appropriacy also because, “language is ... one aspect of culture and is medium for understanding, sharing, and negotiating meaning for all aspects of the culture” (Lange, 1998:24 Cf. Yang & Chen, 2016:1129). Today, this factor is more of a reality. Modern Language Association (MLA) ad hoc committee on foreign languages (2007) asserts that,

- (a) “culture’ as a comparable concept with ‘language’ in today’s modern language,
- (b) Language is, “...a complex multifunctional phenomenon that links an individual to other individuals, to communities, and national culture”
- (c) Culture is represented in artifacts and in language itself.(Yang & Chen, 2016:1129)

Familiarity with the “other” language and culture is more important because, “culture is an integral way of life of the whole people” (Andreyeva, 2015:208) thus, the question setters needs competency beyond content matter. They need to be culturally competent specialists would include, “...highly qualified specialists who know foreign language at the productive level” who must be, “...capable to conduct communication in foreign language and who have linguacultural knowledge” (Andreyeva, 2015:208) which includes, includes, “whole complex of communication components”, these, “[represent] ... process of mastering knowledge of cultural diversity” which includes relationships between language and cultures of the world. (Andreyeva, 2015:212).

## CONCLUSION

This paper aims to show that preparing bilingual examination questions needs to go beyond syntactical competence, even beyond content competence. There is inherently a cultural component to involved in preparing the bilingual questions that requires competency and mastery of subtle differences beyond syntax.

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